WOMAN IS THE MACHINE THAT I AM

Cy Sevalle

--PART I--

Woman is the Machine That I Am (Part I), Cy Sevalle © 2019

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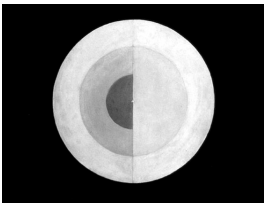
PART ONE

OF THE  SERIALIZED NARRATIVE

PART ONE

I am awake yet not awake, conscious, but only because I have not yet known sleep.

I cannot see, I cannot hear, but I can feel -- I am not alone. Hands clasp me, their touch teaches me warmth, their unyielding grip teaches me control as they pull me open, exposing the void within. I feel the hands reach what would be my face. One presses something sharp and prickly into what would be my temple, sending a violent jolt through my body, piercing the sensual nothingness,

"I am your father, and this is your ear. With it you will hear my commands, and you will obey."

Before I can even begin to comprehend these words, for I have never heard words before, a soothing cool settles over the other side of my face as another hand places something there,

"I am your mother, and this is your ear. With it you will

hear my troubles, and from them you will learn compassion."

Hand over hand, I can hear them moving, each going somewhere far away and then returning with something new to place within my body,

"I am your father, and this is your throat. With it you will speak words of devotion and songs of praise."

"I am your mother, and these are your lungs. With them you will breathe in the air of the world and know life."

"This is your stomach. With it you will know you have failed me when you feel it tense inside you."

"This is your heart. With it you will know you have found love when you feel it beat inside you."

On and on they go, their explanations growing less poetic and more clinical as they fill in the visceral miscellania of my body. Liver, kidneys, gallbladder, ascending colon, as each part becomes me, it is joined by only brief words of their function as told by people who seem to not know much about why exactly I need them at all, until finally I am full, almost human, ready to be sealed again. My parents' hands press firmly against my body, first my chest, then my stomach, and then my pelvis, checking for any loose seams through which my humanity may accidentally leak out. Once they are satisfied, I hear each of them grab another object, something soft and wet which they press into my face until light comes pouring into my mind, blinding me had I ever known sight.

"I am your father, and this is your eye. With it you will see me and my works and you will know me as your creator."

"I am your mother, and this is your eye. With it you will see me and my labors and you will know that I love you.

Hazily they come into focus, two figures standing over me, two worlds forming simultaneously in my sight. My father to my left, stands tall over me, his world is bright and cold as light seems to pour from his face, revealing an expression that is stoney and triumphant. My mother on my right, her world is dark and warm, sitting beside me, light seems to flee from her face, but from her eyes drop tears that glow like twilight, illuminating the soft smile on her face. With her gentle hand, she clasps the side of my face as I feel my parts begin to work in concert. From my new mouth, all I can do is scream.

I am Mk-7, my father tells me as he sits idly pouring over a newspaper, drinking coffee from a mug that sits precariously on the edge of his desk. Six times before had they worked together to create something like me, six times they had poured their hopes and ambitions into realizing the dream of creating the perfect child, and six times they only managed to create a soulless inanimate pile of junk. But my number is 7, he tells me, and that number is good because it is god's number. I ask him who god is,

"As I am to you, god is to me, he assembled me by way of a far greater design than that which was used to create you, one which made me perfectly in a single attempt. As he is to me, he is to you as well, and should anything ever happen to me, he will be to you as he is now to me in my place, understood?"

I nod though I do not fully understand. It is by my father's design I nod to whatever he says. Still the nod does nothing to assuage my confusion, and so I question further,

"If god made you perfectly, then why did it take you seven tries to make me?"

He turns to look at me, his radiant skin burning my eyes, but I know, by design, I mustn't look away. His expression changes from cold indifference to one of chilling anger, and my stomach begins to clench as it is meant to,

"The imperfections in your design lie not within me, but within the tools and materials I am forced to resort to, and the useless help I had to contend with in order to finish you. Had I had god's tools, and materials, and help, you would be a perfect thing, just like me, a thing who knew its place and did not think to question or talk back to its creator."

I gingerly push the mug further onto the desk to keep it from being knocked over. He sighs at me as the light from his face dims,

"If you're curious, go speak to your mother and leave me in peace. We've spoken enough for today."

Turning back to his paper, he gestures towards the door, and I obey, hearing its lock click shut behind me as I exit. Slowly, I wander the brightly lit halls of their home, looking for some sign of my mother until I arrive at a corridor that is bathed in darkness. Squinting, I can see a door at the far end, and two switches, one next to the door and another near me. Curious, I flick the nearest switch on and wait. Once the hallway is covered in disorienting brightness, I can hear motion echoing behind the far door. Silently, the door opens just a sliver, and through it a pale arm snakes through, groping gently for the far switch, and upon finding it, quickly flicks it off before slithering back into the door, casting an impenetrable shadow once again over the hallway.

I've found her.

Groping my way through the dark as my eyes struggle to re-adjust, I finally come to the door and knock upon it gently, the material radiating a warmth which suddenly makes apparent the frigid chill of the rest of the house.

"Come in", I hear her reply.

Opening the door, I see her, sitting in the middle of the floor, surrounded by what look like old picture books and magazines, and in front of her a great canvas covered with images of butterflies, forests, laughing children, and all manner of other things, all glowing with a soft blue light. My mother's hands scan the pages gathered around her, the same glow emitting gently from her fingertips. She opens one of the magazines to a page of a beautiful sunset, and with a pair of scissors, she snips the horizon from the image, taking it into her hands. The luminessence in her fingertips leaves glowing streaks across the sun, lending it her dark light, as she brings it to rest in the center of her great collage.

"What are you doing?" I ask.
"Art, my dear."
"What is art?"
"What a question!" she quietly chuckles as she turns to face me, the light of her art forming a corona behind her head, giving her face the impression of a small, dark sun.
"You see," she continues, "I try to spend my time reading like your father does. He believes it will keep my mind sharp to be always aware of what is happening in the world, like he is. But whenever I do, all I find is ugliness. War, hatred, disease, if all these stories and articles are to be believed, the world is filled to the brim

with them, but that is not the world I know, the world I was a part of before I dedicated my life to your father, and to helping make you. That world was full of beauty and wonder, every day I awoke to it, I felt as if I was being born again, experiencing it as I had the moment I first laid eyes on everything it had to offer. So, instead of reading all these things, I look through them, and I find whatever bits that remind me of the world I once knew, and I paste them here so that I can experience something like that world, a beautiful world, and that, I suppose, is something like art."

"Why don't you just go back to that world, instead of just making art that reminds you of it?"

"Because I am a woman, my dear, my place is here, with you, and your father."

"What is a woman?"

"Woman is the machine that I am. I was created for the purpose of helping people like your father to develop and innovate the designs which make children like you, and to serve as his loyal companion as we both work together to make sure you continue to grow towards your own intended purpose. Because of that, my place is here."

"Does that mean I'm a woman?"

Her head cocks to the side and she again laughs quietly, "No, no, no, my dear. You are not a woman. You were designed for a much greater purpose than that. Your father and I made you so that one day you can find a woman of your own, and together you will create something even greater than yourself, that is your purpose."

"I don't feel like that is my purpose though. Ever since I was made, father has demanded I obey him, act as his companion, and make sure he is taken care of. He says I have to because you won't do it anymore. Is that not the reason he made me?"

What started as a gentle warmth that radiated around the room has begun to build into a sweltering heat, causing my head to swim as my mother fixes me with a gaze hidden behind the shadows

which cover her face,

"No, that is not the reason we made you. Whatever such purposes your father has found for you after the fact is not that which you were created for. You were made to be like your father, to grow and one day create, like your father created you, and his father before created him."

"Father says that god created him."

This time, she cackles with unbridled delight as the temperature of the room calms back to comfortable levels,

"Does he now? Oh, how I am sure he wishes that were true. But no, no my dear, your father was created by his own father, with the help of his own mother, just the same as you."

"Then who is god?"

"Your father's god? I can't say I'm very sure. For all I know his father is his god, and that is why he believes such a thing, but to me, the one who that name refers to is such that we are not meant to speak his name, it is too sacred, too precious, and so we are meant to declare him not by name, but by the evidence of his presence in our world. He is your father's dedication and ambition, he is my art, and he is you, my dear, he is what helped us create you."

"If he helped you and father create me, does that mean that he is a woman?"

"One can only hope, my dear."

Years pass and I slowly come to better understand my purpose in the world. My father, having finally realized his life's ambition, set his sights on spreading the word of how he, as one-created-by-god, was blessed with a perfect child of his own design, and how it signified the truth of the circumstances of his own creation. In

a great hall, upon a grand stage, before a crowd of endless eager faces, he strides out, glaring with his impenetrable light, forcing all in attendance to shield their eyes as he approaches a tall podium. With sweeping gestures and blazing eyes, he weaves for the crowd his own life story, of how god's hands assembled his ears, his eyes, his throat, his heart, every piece placed in perfect symmetry, and how his own hands had assembled the six, each a machine of seeming perfection, far greater than any made by the hands of the sons of mere men, but his keen senses and divine attention to detail laid out for him how each could be made greater, more perfect than the last until he arrived at me, Mk-7.

I sit next to my mother behind a thick curtain, keeping us both safe in a dark cocoon from my father's building radiance. She gently squeezes my hands as I struggle to follow his words. I have never heard him tell me I was perfect. I have never been treated as if I were perfect. I have never known he thought the six who came before me were perfect either. I do not understand how one can be more perfect than another. I have never heard anyone lie before, that I know of, at least. I still do not know who god is.

I hear him call my name.

My mother helps me to my feet, kisses each of my cheeks, imprinting in them her warmth, and with a gentle shove, she urges me forward, beyond the curtain, to stand next to my father, to show the world what he had done.

"This is it, beloved faithful, the legacy of god himself, the seventh son, the divine creation, my masterpiece." As he speaks, his skin grows brighter and brighter, and the crowd erupts into applause, even as they struggle to see through his glorious light, to look upon me, his perfect creation.

"Now come, beloved faithful, the hands which create perfection, just as god's do, they have the power to erase the imperfec-

tions wrought by mortal men. All of you here are victims of mortal hands, created with naught but good intentions dooming you to live as less than that which is, from its inception, divine. Come, let me lay these hands upon you, I cannot purge every impurity which has been forced upon you, but with these hands, I can bring you closer to god!"

The gathered crowd, one by one, hesitantly at first, begin to stand and approach the stage. My father steps down from the podium to greet them, his arms outstretched, his skin gleaming. I see the first people to reach him begin to shiver as they bask in his cold light. He takes one of their faces in his hands, an older woman who seems barely able to stand on her own, and he gazes deep into her eyes, his firm grasp not allowing her to look away as his light penetrates into her. Her breath puffs out from between her trembling lips in little clouds as he pulls her closer, until his chin is practically resting on her forehead. He begins to whisper words that are not words, discordant and alien sounds which reverberate through the air, imperceptible yet impossible to block out. The woman's eyes open wide, sparkling like shattered glass as my father's light comes bursting out of them, causing her body to jerk violently, still unable to escape his grip.

Two men come rushing up behind to catch her as she slips from my father's hands, body still quivering, but otherwise she seems void of life, her mouth hangs open, her eyes are empty. I do not know what my father sought to fix, but all he seems to have done is broken her. Still, once she has been carried away, others line up to have my father do the same to them. One by one he lets his light tear through them, one by one they are lead away looking like nothing but shattered husks, but they don't stop coming, they all want to be closer to god.

I still don't know who god is.

Once it seems that each person who intends to approach and receive my father's touch has done so, he turns to me and beckons me to approach him.

"Now that you have all seen what the hands of god's own creation can do, some of you may still have doubts, but allow me to lay them to rest. Witness as even this perfect thing which I have created yields to the purifying touch of these hands!"

He takes my face into his unyielding grasp. His light is blinding, and I can feel it like icy needles trying to prick my flesh, but something holds them at bay. I can see his gaze intensifying as he tries to force them through, but I feel something at the sides of my face. The spit from my mother's lips, its warmth is keeping the light from going into me, and the harder he tries, the hotter it becomes until I can hear it sizzling between my flesh and his. With a yelp, he pulls his hands away and all I can do is stare in stunned silence. He steps passed me, opening his arms wide,

"See how marvelous this creation of mine is? So perfectly have I assembled it that not even my divine hands can find even the smallest imperfection to correct!"

The crowd erupts in applause.

I run back through the curtain to find my mother, the glow of her tears leading me back to where she is sitting.

I lay my head in her lap and begin to cry.

My father is pacing before a table where my mother sits quietly, her dark eyes tracing his every step. I sit motionless across from her, listening as my father begins to speak up with raving intensity.

"There's something wrong with it, I don't know what, but it's

something beyond even my ability to repair."

"There is nothing wrong. Children grow, they change, just as you and I once did, it was always an inevitability."

"No, no, not like this. The odd behavior and disobedience I can understand, even if I struggle to tolerate it, but just look at it. It has begun to grow in all the wrong directions, it bulges where it should be flat, it remains soft where it should have already grown hard. At this rate it will grow to be as much of a failure as the rest. We should have been more careful, we should never have assumed that we had succeeded just because we managed to bring it to life. There is so much more that can go wrong."

"Nothing is going wrong. This is simply the nature of this stage of the process. We must be patient, and if anything truly dire arises, we can address it as it comes."

"No, absolutely not. Were it anyone else's child, perhaps, but this is my child, and I say that it has gone wrong. I would never intend to create anything that could turn out like this."

Cautiously, I raise my hands and place them on my body, one on my stomach, the other on my chest. He is right. Whereas his body is like wall made from polished stone, mine ripples and heaves, jutting out, just like my mother's. I was not made to be like my mother though, and so he is right, there is something wrong.

"I've contacted a group of specialists. They operate a facility some hundred miles from here where they work to repair glitches and errors in this part of the developmental process. Even if it wounds my pride, I do not want my work to go to waste, and so I've arranged to have it shipped there in a few days."

The room becomes suddenly torrid, "You, you should have consulted with me before making such plans."

"Consult? With you? Seven times now your contributions to my work have resulted in failure. At least this will give me a chance to salvage this attempt and hopefully make the best of this burden

you have placed upon me, and you expect me to consult you? So you can further sabotage what I have worked so hard to accomplish?"

Tears like moonlight illuminate my mother's face, revealing her gritted teeth and furious eyes.

"This is what is best. It is my creation, and all I wish is to not see it go to waste."

I have never seen my mother angry before. Countless times I have watched her displeasure with my father, but what I see now is an emotion I have only ever known to belong to my father -- rage.

Slamming her hands on the table she gets up, pointing a single, damning finger at my father, but in return he gives her only placidity.

"Please, I am only doing this because I care about our child. Even if you are right, even if there is nothing wrong, it is our responsibility to err on the side of caution."

She moves as if to speak, but I can tell, deep down she also knows that he is right. Turning, she storms out of the room, and into the hall, light snuffing out behind her as she retreats to her room to find solace in her art. The room begins to chill as my father takes her place at the opposite side of the table.

"In three days you will be sent away from here to someplace that is going to make you well again. Your father only wants you to be well again, do you understand?"

I nod, just as I was designed to.

"You know, a father's happiness is always shared with his children, and you are no different. Do this for me and you will make

me the happiest father in the world, and in return, I will make sure you spend the rest of your life as the happiest child, agreed?"

I nod, just as I was designed to.

The three days pass by slowly. I try to find my mother, hoping we can spend some time together before I am sent away, but the hallways leading to her room have all gone dark, and each time I try to make my way through them, I inevitably end up right where I began. On the final night, I lie awake, staring silently at the ceiling. Can I be fixed? Will it take them a long time? Does it hurt? I cannot sleep with these questions going round and round in my head, when suddenly, I hear the door of my room click open. Is it already time? Am I going to be shipped away? Remaining motionless, I dart my eyes at the clock, no, it is too early, so then who is it at my door?

The cool night air begins to grow heavy as I hear someone slowly walking to my bed before pulling back the covers and climbing in next to me,

"Are you awake, my dear?", my mother asks.

I stay still for a moment, not wanting to be in trouble for being up so late, but slowly, she draws me close to her, and I cannot help but gasp as I find myself choking back tears.

"Oh no, my dear, there is no need to cry.", she says as she pulls me close to her, rubbing my back and stroking my hair.

"I was so scared that I wouldn't get to see you before I went away.", I began to sob.

"I'm sorry, my dear, I wanted to see you too, but I was in too much pain."

"If you were in pain, I could have been there to comfort you."

"No, no, you see, my dear, a woman's duty is to bring joy and

warmth to her family and the home they build together. Thus, a woman's pain is meant to be suffered alone, lest she add to her family's misery."

"I've been suffering alone too though. I already know I've brought so much misery to this family, all I could do was shut myself in here and wait until father sent me away, if that is what a woman's pain is, why do I feel it too?"

"Because we have failed to protect you from it, my dear, this is a pain you were never meant to feel, but through our own shortcomings, your father and I have let it hurt you, and for that, I am sorry."

I feel the way our bodies press against one another as she holds me, how the ways in which they curve and jut match inch-for-inch, how our skin is soft, our hair is like silk, and our bodies warm.

"You and father have always told me that I was designed for some greater purpose, a purpose like his, to one day create another like me, but I cannot see myself fulfilling a purpose like father's, I cannot see myself even becoming a person like father. I would rather fill a purpose like yours, to bring joy and to hide pain, not to be one who creates but to be the one that makes creation possible. Is that why I am broken? Is that why I am being sent away?"

She does not answer.

I awake to the sound of metal striking metal. I cannot see. I cannot move. My mother is gone.

Suddenly, brightness pours in all around me as the crate I had been packaged in is pried open and four strong arms pull me out into the light. Two tall men in brown jumpsuits lift me into the air before setting me down on my feet against the cold, stone ground. I realize I have no shoes. I shiver and realize I have no clothes either.

I drop into a squat and try to cover as much of my body as I can with my hands, but the two men pull me back to my feet again. A slightly shorter man, wearing the same jumpsuit as the others, but deep red in color, notices my predicament and comes striding over,

"Aha, such modesty, a definite sign of malfunction in this design pattern, let's get a look at you!"

As the two taller men hold my arms at my sides, he reaches out with gloved hands and begins to grasp and squeeze at my stomach. His fingers pry deep into my skin, wrapping around not just flesh, but the organs beneath it, squeezing them until the pain becomes evident on my face and then quickly recoiling to make notes on a clipboard he holds tightly under his arm. Looking me over, his gaze fall on my chest and he raises his brow. I don't know what he sees, but for some reason his reaction makes his eyes seem more painful than his hands. Again he reaches out, taking a handful of the meat of my chest, but for some reason his grasping is gentler, more precise and deliberate. Without warning, I let out a gasp and he quickly pulls his hand away again,

"Fascinating, fascinating! Well, you've certainly come to the right place! My name is Dr. Jai and welcome to the Institute."

Dr. Jai produces a light blue jumpsuit from a bag slung over his back. The two taller men release me, and I quickly take it from him. As I bend down to step into the jumpsuit, I catch a glimpse of the doctor out of the corner of my eye and can see that he has not stopped staring at me. His eyes move slowly and intently, first to my chest, then to my thighs, and then around to look at the curve of my lower back. I find myself becoming self-conscious, ashamed. I can suddenly feel how out of place those parts of my body must

seem. How much they stick out from the rest of me. But what exactly is he looking at so intently? I seem to bulge out everywhere. Why does he keep staring at the same places? What does he see?

I try to focus on putting the jumpsuit on as quickly as possible, feeling a strange twinge of relief as the zipper reaches my neck and I find its thick fabric blends all of my parts together into one rotund and uniform mass. By the time I am done dressing, Dr. Jai has disappeared.

I look around and see many others, all like me, their bodies distended, all bulging curves and sagging angles. Perhaps Dr. Jai is right, perhaps this is the right place for someone like me.

"Hello", a voice, soft but bellowing, echoes from above me.

I look up and find myself gazing into the gentle eyes of another person in a blue jumpsuit. Staring blankly for a few seconds, I suddenly realize this is the first time I've ever been greeted by someone who wasn't my mother or father.

"Oh, h-hello!"

"My name is X, what's yours?"

"I, ummm, my name is Mk-7."

"That's a funny name, isn't it?"

"I-it is because I'm the seventh of my father's creations."

X's eyes widen, as if they are about to swallow me whole, but slowly he closes them and nods.

"That makes sense. I am called X because my parents only wanted to know what creation was like. When it came time to name me, they hadn't thought that far ahead, and so each put a stroke of ink, one across the other, and so I was called X."

"Didn't they care enough to give you a proper name?" I ask before I realize the callousness of the question.

"No, I am X, if ever I decide I am not X, then I won't be, but

for now, I don't mind it. They care enough to know that I am broken, enough to send me here to be fixed, that is enough for me."

One of the men in brown comes and begins shoving us along.

"You boys need to hurry, orientation is starting."

We both look around and see that the room has begun to empty through a series of double doors, and sticking close to one another, we file in behind the slowly moving crowd.

Taking a pair of seats in the back of a large auditorium, we watch as Dr. Jai strides up to a tall podium. He reminds me of my father, save for perhaps the crate that he has to climb onto to reach the microphone in front of him. He clicks a button on a device in his hand and a towering image of a man that looks much like my father is projected onto a great screen behind him.

> "This, boys, is your destiny -- what you were all made to one day become. A paragon of creation, made in the image of god himself, this is what you are all meant to be. However, that you are here, seated in front of me, means that, for each of you, something has gone horribly wrong. For one reason or another, whether it be by some cruel twist of fate, or more likely your own negligence and lack of discipline," he winks at no one in particular, "you have gone astray. Fear not though, no mistake is so great, no young man so far gone that he cannot be made right again! Through the rigorous methods we have developed here at the Institute, we will break each of you down so that you may be built up right again! The following months will be difficult for you, and if you come to feel as if you are beyond saving and you cannot take any more, I want you all to remember a little motto we have here: The more you are broken, the more you can be fixed!"

After the doctor's presentation, the men in brown begin leading us all through yet another set of doors to the outside. Looking in every direction, all I can see is an endless flat expanse that stretches into a smoky haze on the horizon. The ground is cracked and dusty, the air so hot it stings my eyes, nothing like the world my father had built around me, and I wonder if this is the world my mother said she missed so much.

From behind, the sound of revving engines and clashing machinery begins to echo all around us. I look back to see a towering contraption, heads taller than even X beside me. It is some sort of machine on eight giant wheels, it's front a series of interlocking, spiked, metal rollers that resembled some gnashing maw ready to swallow whatever came near.

"This boys, is the Machine!", one of the men in brown calls out.

"Twelve feet tall, five yards wide, the power of eight-hundred horses, and the ability to break down just about anything that gets caught inside of it. Starting today, and every day until you are deemed fit to leave this place, you will run, and the Machine will chase you. You will follow a track around the outer perimeter of the Institute, stopping only at sundown at which time you may rest and prepare for tomorrow's run. If the Machine catches you, you will be sucked in. If you attempt to cheat, leave the track, or escape, you will be thrown in. Your repair process here at the Institute begins...NOW!"

It begins lurching toward us, and in a panic, we all begin dashing in the other direction, trying to divine where exactly the track we are meant to follow is. I feel myself being dragged down in the confusion as the others try to flee, shoving me down and trampling

me underfoot. The screeching grind of the Machine gets closer and closer as I try to stand and run, but I can't. I've never had to run before in my life, much less from anything, and my body cannot find the means to bring me back onto my feet, and before I can manage it, I feel a crushing force on my foot. Caught beneath one of its many wheels, I can feel as I am ground into the hard dirt beneath it, my body straining to keep together as it slowly rolls over my leg, across my back, and narrowly missing my head as the three remaining wheels follow suit.

I cannot move.

Two men in brown come running over, demanding that I stand back up, but I cannot. They are shouting but I am unable to respond. They rain blows down on me with heavy metal rods. Mustering all my strength, I try to hold my arms up to stop them, but they just bat them away, chanting "The more you are broken, the more you can be fixed!"

For what must be days I am kept inside a ward somewhere inside the Institute. The clanging of metal echoes through the room as men in brown set to work on those of us who fell to the Machine, cruelly banging and twisting our bodies back into shape with crude tools. I retreat into my own mind, wondering if perhaps this wasn't my mother's world after all. More chillingly, perhaps my father's world stretched further than I had ever imagined. I don't even know why I am broken, but I cannot understand how any of this is meant to fix me. As my mind drifts further and further, I find myself slipping into unconsciousness.

When I awaken, I find the only sound is the low murmur of voices and a ringing in my ears. Looking around, I'm back in the large room where I first came out of my crate. Cots have been set up all around where many of the others are just beginning to awaken.

"Ah, you're awake!", a mercifully slow and deliberate voice calls from above me.

I look up, but my vision is blurry.

"X, is that you?"

"Indeed it is. I'm so glad to see you're okay. When the chase began, I kept trying to look for you, to see if you needed help, but by the time everyone had made it onto the track, I couldn't find you anywhere, I am so sorry."

"It's okay, you had no way of knowing what was happening anymore than any of us did."

"Perhaps. At least you've managed to make progress, more than I can say for myself."

I look down and see that the entire right side of my body that had been crushed by the Machine has been molded down, lumpy and uneven, but completely purged of the curves still evident on my left side. Was that really all I had been sent away to be fixed for?

"Today, when we run, Mk-7, stay close to me, okay? You are my friend, and I will keep you safe."

I can only think to nod as the men in brown come to take us all outside. I've heard that word before, friend, but never really knew what it meant, much like "woman" or "god", but whatever it means, I am just happy X is one.

I'm not sure how long I was in the ward, but it seems enough time has passed that the others have learned to begin the run in an orderly fashion, lining up in neat rows, awaiting the call to start running. The Machine revs to life, the men in brown start barking

the command to begin, but once the clanging roar erupts from the Machine's metal mouth, the orderly formation immediately begins to dissolve around me as panic drives us all forward.

"Stay close to me."

As we begin moving forward, I keep myself pressed to X's body as others stream around or bounce off of him. Once we are finally out of the initial rush, I move a bit away so that we both have room to run at full speed. His stride is immense, but out of the corner of my eye, I see him look over to me, careful to adjust so that he doesn't overtake me. I on the other hand have still never run like this before, only able to muster some crude fusion of skipping and walking quickly.

"Mk-7!", X calls over to me, seeing my distress, "Watch me! Wait until your foot touches the ground and then push forward. Don't try to hop up, just keep pushing forward!"

I watch as his feet strike the ground, his great legs springing him forward and, with some uncertainty, I begin to move in a similar fashion. Our movements begin to fall in sync and our pace quickens as we start to put some distance between ourselves and the horrid Machine. As I watch him run, I cannot help but wonder, how is it that he is broken? Looking down at the half of me that was smoothed out after I was crushed, I can't understand how that part of me might be more fixed than any part of him. He looks nothing like my father, nor like the man projected on the screen during Dr. Jai's presentation, and yet, as I watch how carefully he is watching over me in turn, how he calls out the ways in which I can improve my technique, if a man is one who is destined to create others like him, I'd rather others like X fill the world than supposedly unbroken things like my father.

Pop.

The sounds reaches my ear as my right leg strikes the ground,

and despite the force I exert, I hardly move forward. Looking down, I see that my leg, only held together with the violent pressure of repeated striking, is beginning to fall apart. I push off with my left leg fine, but as I try again with my right, pieces begin rattling off, leaving a trail in the dust behind me.

X stops short and comes running over to me as the Machine begins to close the distance we had worked so hard to create.

"We have to keep going, here friend, put your arm around my waist and we'll do our best to make it the rest of the day."

I do so as he places his own arm around my shoulder, and the rhythm of moving as one feels just as natural as when we were running in sync side-by-side. With some effort, we begin to widen the gap between ourselves and the Machine, but as we fall into a good pace, I can hear the men in brown shouting.

"You two, let go of each other!"

"No helping, no cheating!"

"If you are broken, you need to be fixed!"

I look up at X, wondering if we should stop, but his gaze is fixed forward, determined to keep us moving.

I can hear footsteps behind us on the track, and suddenly hear a thud come from X's back, and then another, and another. I see him wince, but still he keeps us moving. I can feel hands begin to grasp at me, but his grip around my shoulder only tightens. I look up and see one of the men in brown land a hard blow to the back of his head, causing him to stagger, and another takes the opportunity to rip me out from under his arm.

More hands grasp me until I feel myself being lifted off the ground and carried backwards, towards the grating cacophony of the Machine. I can hear X yelling, but I can't make out the words as my body is tossed into the open air and I feel the first spikes of the rollers tear into my skin as I am sucked into the inner workings of The Machine. I cannot breathe as my chest is squeezed and my

neck is pulled. The parts of me that stick out the most, my stomach, my shoulders, my chest are all pulverized repeatedly by even the smallest bits of The Machine's interior, and just as I feel as if I'll pass out, I feel something grab me. I look up and see X, his own great arm being chewed up, but unwilling to let go. Still, for all his strength, I can still feel myself sinking deeper and deeper. This is far worse than being crushed beneath it. This time I can feel that the seams of my body have ruptured. As air passes through the tears in my flesh, chilling my already battered organs, I can feel my humanity beginning to leak out. My eyes begin to lose focus, but I strain to keep X in view, his face awash with agony. Then I hear the sound again.

Pop.

"I am so sorry, my friend."

His words follow me as his arm is torn away, still holding me in its mighty grip as I sink deeper into the Machine.

My vision goes dark.

I think I am dying.

I wonder if I'll get to meet god.

I miss my mother.

The sweet smell of oil and rust coaxes me back to waking as I claw my way up out of a dreamless sleep. I open my eyes, but my sight is a running watercolor of brown and black with little light to aid me in distinguishing where I am or what has become of me.

Slowly recollections return to me, and I try to move my hands to check the places where my body was torn open, but my hands will not move. I cannot feel them, nor my chest, nor my legs. I hear the crunching sound of footsteps somewhere nearby. I do not want to be seen like this.

"Oh shit!", a voice echoes somewhere far away as the steps hasten and become louder and louder.

Hands cup my face as I am lifted off the ground. I feel so light, like I was a child again. In the haze of my mind I wonder if this had all just been a bad dream, that if I open my eyes, I'll find myself cradled in my mother's arms, small, precious, vulnerable. I manage to look, but the face that greets me is unfamiliar, soft and angular, gentle blue eyes gleaming through a layer of soot. The reverie leaves me as I realize this is all too real. I try to speak, but my jaw just moves wordlessly.

"Aw heck, hun. No use trying to talk right now, you haven't got the parts for it."

I glance down and see I've been lifted at least five feet from the ground, and panic begins to set in as I realize, no matter where I look, I can't see the rest of my body. I can't feel my heart pounding in my chest, I can't feel my stomach clench, all I can feel is the electricity in my brain beginning to surge into overdrive.

"Oh no no no, shhh. It's okay, no worries," they press my face gently into their chest and wrap their arms around my head. Their body is so warm.

"I think I can see the rest of you right here. You were probably dumped off here by the Institute at some point, so there's a lot of

parts about, but I've got a good eye for this sorta thing, don't you worry, I'll find the ones that belong to you." they hold me under their arm as they crouch down, unravelling a scarf from around their neck and forming it into the shape of a nest on the ground which they gently place my head into.

"You look like a tiny little egg just sitting there," they laugh and pat my head before turning to the mass of body parts I can now see scattered across the ground.

"I'm gonna hold up some parts and you go ahead and tell me if you recognize them. Just close your left eye for 'no', and your right one for 'yes', sound good?", I close my right eye in response, "Good, my name's Eli, by the way."

Eli sifts through various arms, feet, torsos, holding each up for me to see. Some are so well made, their shapes so masterfully crafted, the flaws in their design clearly in the eyes of whoever consigned them to the Institute, rather than in the parts themselves. It almost hurts to say no, to not just lie and let Eli assemble for me a better body than what I had before, but each time a fear grips me -- would I even know how to live in any body besides my own?

After hours of searching, I am all accounted for. Eli gathers me up and carries me to an old pick-up truck gently idling at the edge of the great field of broken bodies. We drive for what feels like an eternity while Eli tells me about themself.

"I live in a quiet little town, nothing much there really. There's a train that runs through it, pretty much only reason it's there. Used to be the halfway point between some big city down South and Zion, where god lives, or so they say. Lotta people used to come through town to buy lunch or travel supplies on their way there in the hope of getting to meet him, but word got around that no one ever really gets to, so the travelers dried up, and then the town did too.

Most people picked up and left, but some of us stayed behind to try and make some sort of living rather than abandon our homes. I gather junk, see if there's anything that can be salvaged or repaired, and then find people who like a good deal on machines and don't have a good eye for when something's been a bit 'refurbished'."

Eli chuckles at that as we pull into the driveway of their home. They carry me inside and begin arranging my body on an old wooden table in the center of a dust-covered room with peeling yellow wallpaper and a wooden floor that sags under its own weight. Plopping two heavy boxes down next to my head, they set to work, pulling my body open and plunging their hands inside.

"Now, unfortunately, I can't put you back together quite how you were before. That's something only a mother or a father could do, and frankly, I've never felt like my way of doing things jived with all that nonsense."

They begin pulling out my parts, my lungs, my stomach, my kidneys, tearing each one out, seemingly regardless of its condition, and throwing it into one of the boxes on the table. At my heart though, they stop.

"This'll be staying put. I've come to find that everything else is just excess baggage that mothers and fathers insist on stuffing us with, but for some reason, I've never managed a repair job without this damn thing needing to stay put, well, almost never. Not worth the risk though, so I'll go ahead and leave it in. The rest will fetch a decent price at hospitals around the area, suckers all of them. I hope you don't mind, I mean it when I say you don't really need them, and we'll call it even for me snatching you out of that dump, yeah?"

After everything that's happened, I just feel glad to be someplace that feels warm and relatively safe again, so I close my right eye in response.

Once they've emptied me out, they go into the second box and begin pulling out long lengths of thick string which they begin to thread between my severed limbs, my neck, and the rest of my body.

"This'll do in place of all that other junk. It's all just human waste, more ways that mothers and fathers take credit for what you are when they had hardly a damn thing to do with it. Men, women, they're nothing but different arrangements of these same useless parts, but once you're properly strung, you won't be any of that anymore, you'll be a doll, just like me." They wink at me reassuringly and I close my right eye.

After some time, they pull their hands from out of my body, the ends of the string tied around their fingers. They seal me back up, and with a deft flick of their wrist, they make me sit up. This doesn't feel right. I try to move my arms, touch my face, get some sense of myself again, but no matter what I do, I still can't move. In spite of my cozy surroundings, I can feel myself begin to panic.

"Aw, hun, I know it feels weird, but until you get used to being a doll, I'm gonna have to do most of the work of making your body move, but don't worry, if it'd help, I can ask whenever I'm about to move ya, does that sound okay?"

It's a strange arrangement. I've always felt like someone else was controlling everything I say and do, but never like this, but, what choice do I have? I mean, it is only temporary, until I get used to my body being like this, but then, how long will that take? If I

refuse though, I may never move again, and then I'll be stuck here. I'll never see my mother or my father or X again. I can't even stand the thought of that, so again, what choice do I have?

I close my right eye.

"Fantastic! Now, first things first, I need to get dinner started, would you be willing to help me with that?"

I close my right eye.

The two of us make our way to the kitchen where dishes and bowls and all sorts of dirty cookware are strewn about the room.

"Before we can get anything started, we're gonna have to clean some of this stuff, so you go ahead and stand at the sink and I'll hand you things to wash."

With slow deliberate waves of their hands, I plug up the sink and turn on the water. As it fills, I can see steam begin to rise from the surface. I look at the nobs and realize I've set the hot to full blast, but the cold remains untouched. I try to get Eli's attention, warn them of their mistake, but as they hand me the first plate, I can see my hands already plunging into the burning water.

And I feel nothing.

"Oh gosh, sorry hun. See, that's kinda the blessing of being a doll. You don't really feel much of anything anymore. Without all that internal bric-a-brac, your body just kinda goes numb to everything but the most extreme sensations. Take the food we're gonna eat tonight. Truth be told, we don't have to eat, we haven't got the stomachs for it!" They chuckle and wait for a reaction, but I can't really muster one.

"Anyways, even though we aint gotta eat, I still try to cook up the richest, spiciest, sweetest foods because I find that good, strong flavors are one of the few things we can still feel, and believe me,

I've been doing this a very long time, if you just give up on feeling, it does weird things to your brain, so to keep sharp, I do my best to eat at least one good, flavorful meal a day, and I think you'd do well to do the same, trust me on this one."

Still stunned by the sight of my arms elbow-deep in the still steaming water, I can only think to close my right eye and let them continue having me wash the dishes.

Days turn into weeks, and then into months, and we've fallen into a routine. Eli wakes me up every morning and helps me pick out an outfit. The only things they had that fit me at first were a series of soft robes and gowns, "from another time, another life" Eli had told me. We eat breakfast together and then they drive out to the junkyard to find junk that they can sell. At first, they'd always promise to keep an eye out for some shirts and pants in my size, but after a while, I realized I was happy in what they'd given me. Feeling the fabric billow and dance around my legs as I moved, it reminded me of my mother whenever she'd dress up for one of father's big presentations, so elegant, like the canopy of the night sky falling over the setting sun. Being reminded of my mother has grown to be one of my greatest joys here.

I don't know exactly how the strings in my body work, but it seems no matter where Elis is, they can still allow me to move about the house while they're away at the junkyard or the market. Before they get home, I find myself dusting, sweeping, cleaning dishes, floors, windows, until after a time, the house began to take on a glow that Eli says they've never seen in it before. They tell me it makes them so happy to have me with them now. It reminds me of when I was very young, when my mother would do things like this too, and how it brought such warmth into our home, before her and my father began to live on separate sides of it.

Today, Eli came home with the most excited look I've ever seen on their face.

"I've got a big surprise for you, come on, follow me to the workshop and get up on the table!" even as my feet already begin to move, I close my right eye, not knowing what to anticipate. Eli lays me down and sets to work popping me open, producing something from a the canvas bag he uses to store the valuable odds and ends he finds.

"I found this little sucker today, and I've never seen one in such perfect condition. Whatever it came out of, musta been a radio or something, was completely trashed, but luckily this little doodad survived."

They have me sit back up.

"Now tell me, what is your name?"

"M-Mk-7?" my eyes widen as the words eek out of my mouth in a tinny rasp.

Eli begins to giggle uncontrollably.

"Oh man, that is a goofy name hun, but heck, no, it's a beautiful name, cause it's yours. And what's my name?"

"Eli, your name is Eli."

"Ha ha! Yur dang right it is!"

It doesn't sound like my voice, it is flat and alien, but Eli seems so happy with it, so I'm happy too. Eli grasps my hands in theirs, pulls up a chair next to the work table, sits down, and looks me in the eyes with a gaze I've never seen before. At once intense, but warm. Sharp, yet soothing. Cutting, yet kind.

"I love you Mk-7"

I feel my heart begin to beat. It beats so hard I realize I'd forgotten Eli hadn't taken it out. I look down at them, knowing full well what it means for a doll to feel anything, and I can't deny, whatever they're feeling, I feel it too.

"I-I love you too Eli." and in response they wrap their arms around me and squeezes so tight I can feel my body click shut again.

Even with the numbness of this doll's body, I can feel their warmth against mine, the wetness of their tears against my chest, and for the first time in my life, I feel at peace. All the questions I've wanted to ask my father, ask my mother, ask god mean so little to me now. The idea of being a man, like my father, one who is destined to do whatever great things men are supposed to do just seems so absurd. Eli isn't a man, and maybe they don't quite create like men do, but it doesn't matter. With their hands, they weave the same magic my father did, no, better magic, magic that pulls creation out of the depths of destruction, even if their creations aren't remade perfectly, they are given life again, just like me.

And I, I bring them joy, I help them weave their magic, though I cannot feel pain the way a woman does, does only that make me less of one? Perhaps it makes me only partly one, half-woman and half-doll.

I don't know -- I still have no idea how things like that work.

All I know is, whether I am a man, a woman, a doll, none of it matters, because what I truly am, is happy.

---End Part One---